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Digital News and People with Disabilities:

Where are We Headed?

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Digital News and People with Disabilities:

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by

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Many people with disabilities have been traditionally excluded from receiving or interpreting the news. U.S. law has changed requirements for Internet content and will lead to drastic changes in how news is conveyed online. Mainstream media is making headway toward communicating to the culture and abilities of people with disabilities, but serious errors still exist, particularly in digital news formats that exclude many people with disabilities from accessing news. While people with different disabilities are producing primarily niche news content, mainstream media is still the main source of authoritative news regarding people with disabilities. Hiring news staff with disabilities will help mainstream media develop an understanding of the physical, cultural and intellectual requirements of people with a variety of abilities.

Table of Contents

Digital News and People with Disabilities: Where are We Headed?

Hypothesis

With technological advancements, people with disabilities have greater access to news content because of more accessible means to receive it. Not only is news more accessible, but because of available technology, some people with disabilities are creating news media. Since many groups of people with disabilities have recently gained access to enabling technology, there are a few digital news publications produced by individuals who have disabilities. For now, mainstream media is the primary source of digital news for people with disabilities.

Mainstream media content has often been inaccessible to people with disabilities. News fonts have traditionally been a smaller point size that excludes readers with low vision and the trend has carried over into Internet articles. Videos and sound clips are available online or linked to and many don't have captions or descriptive voice; the standard format excludes users who are hard of hearing, deaf, deafblind or blind. Furthermore, interactive elements of digital news—such as polls and forms—may in their construction be inaccessible to people using screen readers, voice recognition software or modified computer equipment for manual dexterity needs.

Since U.S. law has advanced to protect the right of Americans with disabilities to access Web content, media companies will need to adjust their methods of communication so that they are not discriminatory or prohibitive. This will involve revising website organization and construction for enhanced readability, adding captions to videos and audio clips, complementing videos with descriptive voice, labeling visuals, and ensuring that forms can be completed with

alternative means of access. Beyond the physical digital landscape, mainstream media—and news sources developed by people with disabilities—needs to construct a comprehensive knowledge of the disability experience. One of the best ways to acquire this will be to hire people with disabilities on news staffs to gain a greater understanding of the needs of news content consumers. Then, articles and complementary content in digital news media can demonstrate a cultural, intellectual, and physical grasp of the lives of people who have disabilities. This is more complicated than it sounds; people belonging to many disability cultures have distinct differences and may not be aware of trends and needs within other cultures with disabilities. The assumption should not be made that individuals with one disability intuitively understand all others, any more than a person belonging to one ethnicity would understand all other ethnicities. However, a person with one disability may be more empathetic to people who have other disabilities because of a common understanding of what it's like to live a life adapting to circumstances that would otherwise exclude them from participating.

Since digital media is still evolving alongside technology, it's difficult to predict the future of online news and how it will include people with disabilities, but it's easy to see that now is the time for publishers and journalists to ask questions as they navigate new terrain. If news producers want to report disability events and viewpoints, where will reporters learn how to do this? Who will train them? Do they need specialized training, beyond learning about fair reporting of multiple sides of an issue? What are successful mainstream and disability publications and practices? If disability news is developing, how can companies create new publication formats that allow universal accessibility? Is it possible that universal website design, a fully accessible format, might lead to a better digital news experience for all? In the midst of niche digital publications and blogs, where will news regarding disability issues fit? Finally, are

people with disabilities and related events receiving adequate and reasonably unbiased coverage in digital news media right now? The hypothesis for this research presupposes that the answer for the final question is that people with disabilities are not receiving adequate and unbiased coverage, and that such coverage should be equitable to balance out previous underreporting. One of the reasons for this is because the answers to the preceding questions have yet to be answered conclusively, much less revealed to the entire news community.

Overview

A significant number of Americans have a disability. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 report "Americans with Disabilities," 19 percent of Americans—56.7 million people—have a disability and 10 percent self-identify as having a severe one. Computers, other electronic devices and the Internet have enabled people with disabilities to participate in information exchange and self-advocacy—but it's not as easy as it could be.

While members of previous civil rights movements relied upon open communication with other members, this has not been the case in the disability community since groups with different abilities lacked methods for intercommunication, even within small communities. Until recently, people belonging to various disability groups were unable to engage with mainstream digital media: to receive news content, products or services, or to participate socially. For example, people who were blind could not read websites. According to the National Federation of the Blind, "until 1995, the nation's blind did not have the promise of ready access to a fundamental source of such information—the daily newspaper." People who are deaf could not listen to music, movies, or news video clips and telecommunications were difficult. In 2012, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, in the California court case, *Greater LA Agency on Deafness, et al. v. Cable News Network, Inc.*, CNN argued that its right of free speech meant that it did not have to produce captioning with its news content because it was an editorial choice. Though United States Magistrate Judge Laurel Beeler denied the news giant's attempted motion for dismissal, an uncomfortable question surfaces: do news producers knowingly exclude groups of people with disabilities? Does this happen often?

Other groups have been excluded from digital news media because they have physical or intellectual disabilities. In some cases, people who possessed assistive technology were hindered by website architecture. People with manual dexterity needs could not type or navigate the Internet for news; people with speech difficulty could not ask questions in webinars. In other cases, enabling technology was developing; for example, some people with autism did not have a means of communication or the means they had were limited and time-consuming.

A portion of the disability community has been prevented from learning about emergency events, such as approaching storms. Other people with disabilities have experienced transportation difficulties that have kept them from physically gathering information not available in mainstream media, limiting access to data to discern that greater opportunities were available to them. Moreover, the initial costs of computers and other technology were prohibitive for people with disabilities who had limited income, particularly those who had severe disabilities that lowered their employment prospects. Federal law paved the way for requiring accessible communications, transportation and media formats.

While most people know adaptive technology exists, if they aren't living in a community with people who have a similar disability, there is little means for them to access information regarding technological advancements that they would find beneficial. Schools don't know enough regarding all disabilities to provide enough information. According to Daniel P. Hallahan et al. in *Exceptional Learners An Introduction to Special Education*, "Most schools do not now make maximum use of available technology" (512). Despite this, many people discover technology that aids them in areas of a disability, but it should not be assumed that all people have access or knowledge of all resources available to them.

As assistive technology, the equipment people use to aid them in their area of disability, and Internet access becomes more available and maneuverable, and mobility issues are resolved, groups of people who formerly couldn't receive digital news content are now gathering together and self-advocating. They are producing digital news media and blogs, videos, and even posting breaking news on Twitter. While the Smithsonian has already had an exhibit for disability rights, the movement is not a finished product. The CNN case demonstrates that if people can't access news, they aren't a part of it. For every uncaptioned segment of CNN news broadcast online and linked to by other websites, scores of deaf and hard of hearing consumers are left without recourse and excluded from accessing news reported in the publication's video format. If people aren't privy to national news and are making a stand for it, this is evidence that more needs to be done.

The exciting part is this: since we are in the middle of the disability rights movement, digital news media—some mainstream and that created by people with disabilities—is leading the charge. This is a new age of understanding, where abilities—not disabilities—become the focus.

Accessing News

Federal law didn't prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities until the 1970s. Because the laws didn't exist, there was little policy to guide conduct in government and private sectors. Without policy, awareness of disability-related concerns was limited. The greatest limitations people with disabilities faced were often based on their physical need for assistive equipment; in many cases, they didn't own the technology to access information systems, or the type of communication technology they needed hadn't yet been invented. Now that most people with disabilities can utilize assistive technology to engage digital media, they are increasing their participation in responding to news content, interacting with it, and creating it.

In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was made law. According to Dr. John M. Slatin and Sharron Rush in *Maximum Accessibility*, the act "prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." In addition, Section 504 of the act states that no qualified people with disabilities should be excluded from participation in or the benefits of activities receiving federal financial assistance. Section 504 covers employment, education, health, welfare and other social services and any group or agency that receives federal money is accountable under the section. In 1975, educational accessibility was made law with the Individuals with Disabilities Act, called IDEA.

Civil rights and the concept of discrimination against people with disabilities differed from that of other groups. Slatin and Rush explain, "To treat people with a disability exactly the 'same' as peers without a disability is usually to exclude them from participation in a specific program or activity." This is why accommodations are a necessary part of public policy—they create equitable opportunities for people who have needs beyond receiving the same amount as

others to achieve equality. Still, ensuring accommodations is difficult because "although we have made progress in identifying the need to include people with disabilities, there is still much to be done to actually meet that need" (28-31).

Slatin and Rush say the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 "extends the promise of equal treatment for people with disabilities into the private arena" because "the ADA applies to all places of public accommodations, to most employers and to all Title II entities, which are local and state governments (32-33). According to the Access Board's website,

> The ADA covers a wide range of disability, from physical conditions affecting mobility, stamina, sight, hearing, and speech to conditions such as emotional illness and learning disorders. The ADA addresses access to the workplace (Title I), State and local government services (Title II), and places of public accommodation and commercial facilities (Title III). The act also required phone companies to provide telecommunications relay services for people who have hearing or speech impairments (Title IV).

The ADA was significant because it established enforcing agencies in areas of employment, state and local agencies, transportation, public accommodations and telecommunications.

The Americans with Disabilities Act led to significant changes for people with disabilities. A man who was using a wheelchair protested the lack of bus access before the ADA was made into law by holding up a sign that read, "I can't even get to the BACK of the bus." Such was the situation before the act was passed. Accessible entries to public buildings are a result of the ADA (Slatin and Rush 35).

Website accessibility was the focus of the 1998 amendment to the Rehabilitation Act, Section 508. The amendment mandated that if federal agencies use Electronic and Information Technology, or EIT, then they would ensure that federal employees with disabilities could "have access to and use of information and data that is comparable to the access to and use of information and data by other federal employees." The U.S. Access Board was charged with the

developing standards and defining EIT standards. Section 508 and recent court cases make website accessibility less of an option. Though federal law isn't often guided by international court decisions, it can be informed by them. Decisions abroad can indicate upcoming trends on the international landscape. In 1999, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission determined that any organization or individual creating a Web page in Australia must make it accessible (Slatin and Rush 38-45), leading the way to a future where people who have disabilities—and people with temporary injuries—have fewer communications, travel and social obstacles.

On a *60 Minutes* segment reported by Lesley Stahl, 28-year-old Joshua Hood, who has Asperger's Syndrome, had to tap each letter of the alphabet, one at a time, to "speak." According to the segment, Hood "sat passively in class, unable to participate." With an iPad, Hood used special applications to communicate. He ordered at a restaurant without saying a word—the iPad spoke for him. He was no longer isolated. In the *60 Minutes* captioned news segment, his therapist Tammy Taylor said, "He's part of the community. I mean, communication is the essence of being human." According to the report, a study had found that using an iPad has encouraged children who have autism to socialize.

"The Disability Rights Movement" exhibit at the Smithsonian museum "documented how access to information and communication systems through technologies—such as telecaptioners, teletypewriter devices for telephones, voice-recognition systems, voice synthesizers, screen readers and computers—is crucial to the success" of the disability rights movement (Slatin, 27) and these same tools make news content available for processing and information exchange. Now that technology has advanced, formerly silent individuals such as Joshua Hood can participate in and produce digital news media

People with disabilities as digital media producers

Technological advancements make media accessible

A marriage between design and available technology is necessary to ensure an inclusive Internet. According to Paulla A. McLellelan's dissertation, *Web Accessibility*, four types of users with disabilities may need additional technology to interact online: people who are blind or have low vision, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, people who have motor disabilities and people who have cognitive disabilities.

People who are blind or have low vision may encounter difficulties when shopping online if they can't see the difference between sale prices advertised in red print and regular print, or might have difficulty with their screen reader (a device that renders what it reads online to speech or a braille printout) if they couldn't use the tab feature to scan through text. Another problem they face is when a screen reader encounters an image with no description, which doesn't enable them to engage website content. A visual should add meaning to the written content and if the visual isn't described for a user who is blind, then he or she will miss the extra intended purpose.

According to McLellelan, people who are deaf or hard of hearing "have no way of understanding information that is communicated by sound." Therefore, any time sound is used to convey information, a person with hearing loss or deafness would need a visual accompaniment in order to process the information. This would include videos or audio content, as well as voice-only communications, such as webinars.

McLellelan says that motor disabilities can include limitations of muscular control or sensation, joint problems, or missing limbs, and pain that might interfere with movement. Assistive technology for people who have motor disabilities might include voice-recognition programs, modified mice or keyboards—even an eye-tracking system (14-16).

It stands to reason that news producers may not know how to make their publications accessible to this modified technology. If, for example, the technology requires scrolling down a survey using a tab key and the survey form doesn't allow that, then it would hinder people with limited motor functions from participating in the survey.

> Design elements can compound problems for users with cognitive and neurological disabilities including: visual and auditory perceptual disabilities; attention deficit disorders; learning disabilities; memory impairments; mental health disabilities; and seizure disorders, and can make some sites completely inaccessible for them (McLellelan).

Graphics, a consistent navigational structure, straightforward language and calm colors can help people with cognitive or neurological disabilities. Avoiding flashing animations and lights can help prevent seizures brought on by these light patterns (14-18).

Creating accessible digital media involves thinking differently and imagining new scenarios for interacting with content and it involves study. Scientific understanding of disabilities led to inventions that enabled people to adapt to their environment. A similar methodological process will be needed to make websites accommodate technology.

Technology enables the creation of disability-specific news content

Now that people can use assistive technology to interact with digital media, disability-specific content has developed because an interested readership exists. While people with disabilities create news content, they do not necessarily feel the need to declare their status to

readers, and not self-identifying their disability is part of their right to establish an equal status as news producers regardless of ability. But it is understood—and is sometimes obvious— that people who create content for these publications have a connection to what they cover.

One of the best examples of disability-related news content is the *Braille Monitor*, which has been a publication of the National Federation of the Blind since 1957. According to the organization's website,

> The *Braille Monitor* offers a positive philosophy about blindness to both blind readers and the public at large; serves as a vehicle for advocacy and protection of civil rights; addresses social concerns affecting the blind; discusses issues relating to employment, education, legislation, and rehabilitation; and provides news of products and technology used by the blind.

The November 2012 issue of the *Braille Monitor* begins with a description of available formats for the publication and an explanation of how to use the necessary technology to access it. Topics include a disability law symposium, the democratization of braille, learning how to use a white cane, making books accessible, and support groups for seniors who are blind. One article, "The Daisy Consortium Global Partnership," was written by Stephen King, the president of the Digital Accessible Information System Consortium. In it, he tells readers, "I don't have to tell you about the reality of the book famine. Fewer than 5 percent of books are available in any sort of accessible format." King's audience has probably experienced the shortage of books firsthand and can appreciate his presentation of new technology that will lower the price of e-readers and open all books up to blind readers for the same price that people who aren't blind pay. Readers who aren't blind might ask, "Are people who are blind paying more for books?" Only people who have experience with the blind community would know.

The *Braille Monitor* teaches accessibility within its format, an underappreciated trait, and provides several forms in which to access it (email, inkprint, Braille, USB flash drive, MP3—

plus its digital layout is simple and accessible to screen readers). Beyond accessibility, its content is meaningful for all types of readers (or listeners)—from those interested in cutting-edge legal updates to people wanting recipes. The publication provides a positive voice in support of self-advocacy and unity.

Disability Scoop is an online daily news source that has covered developmental disability news since 2008. Developmental disabilities are those that develop during childhood and include intellectual disabilities, Down's syndrome and cerebral palsy. In August 2012, in the article "Airline iPad Policy Sparks Disability Dispute," Michelle Diament reported that a young woman with autism, Carly Fleischmann, took an iPad aboard an American Airlines flight. The device is what she uses for communication. According to the report, Fleischmann said the flight attendant told her that the airline's policy was to have electronic devices turned off during lift off "and that with all her years of flying that she's never seen or heard anybody using an iPad to communicate before. "

While the flight crew depicted in the *Disability Scoop* article didn't validate Fleishchmann's need to have accommodated speech because of her autism, the news publication was familiar with this phenomenon:

> Fleischmann, whose intellectual capabilities went unknown until age 11 when she began to type, is well-known with her story having been featured on ABC News, CNN and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, among others. She has a strong social media presence with over 42,000 fans on Facebook and some 26,000 Twitter followers and they were quick to respond, flooding American Airlines' Facebook page to demand answers.

The electronic publication addresses the needs of a segment of people with disabilities, in this case, people with autism.

According to an article by Shaun Heasley for *Disability Scoop*, the Statue of Liberty is now wheelchair-accessible. The journalist's choice of topic shows an understanding of areas of

interest to people with disabilities and specifically for wheelchair users. Those who have visited Lady Liberty would know that it was filled with stairs. People who have experience with wheelchairs would understand that stairs present a wall of inaccessibility to wheelchair users.

As is the case with most news media, *Disability Scoop* has a niche market—developmental disabilities. However, with a variety of news content concerning people with disabilities, it would be easy to assume the publication reports on all disabilities and not just those incurred before adulthood. This would particularly be the case with many individuals who don't know that developmental disabilities exclude large groups of people. For example, the distinction excludes seniors who have acquired disabilities as a result of aging and people who suffered trauma from accidents during adulthood.

New Mobility is a magazine produced for wheelchair users. It was founded in 1989 and "encourages the integration of active-lifestyle wheelchair users into mainstream society, while simultaneously reflecting the vibrant world of disability-related arts, media, advocacy and philosophy." The publication has a history of having editors who are wheelchair users and on the publication's website, the current editor, Tim Gilmer, says he uses a wheelchair in his biography.

This publication encourages readers to stretch their boundaries. In a recent article by Mark Boatman, "Paraplegic Skydiver Gains Solo Certification," a man who is one of the only paraplegic solo skydivers in the country gets solo certification, which means he had to rely on his strength alone to complete the jump. Boatman reports, "The U.S. Coast Guard veteran now plans to introduce wounded warriors to the rush-inducing sport. He says he wants them to try it and experience the temporary freedom from their disability." Even those who have the same condition might not have thought this possible, and since this article reports on the first skydiver

with paraplegia to do so alone, Boatman's article encourages readers to add to their minds' realms of possibility.

New Mobility integrates blog content with its news. Tiffany Carlson's "Spin 2.0" is one of the publication's associated blogs. In a recent entry, Carlson discussed a temperature-regulating blanket that would benefit people with spinal cord injuries that cannot regulate their body temperature. Carlon, who has a spinal cord injury, admits that she'd pay well to get a good night's sleep, since her body's inability to self-regulate doesn't let her sleep many hours. Her experience lends meaning to her content and proposes a solution to a problem few would know existed. If a person had knowledge that the bodies of some people who have spinal cord injuries don't self-regulate temperature, would he or she intuit that this would lead to sleep difficulties? It seems this is privileged knowledge.

New Mobility's blend of news and blogs creates a holistic publication with a wide appeal for people who use wheelchairs. Since some people who have spinal cord injuries have limited manual dexterity, adaptive technology has made it possible for them to become news producers, and *New Mobility* either would not exist or would be limited without technological adaptations.

Specialization has its drawbacks. The disability community rarely unites to create news content regarding all disabilities, so that the larger picture can be seen. For example, would some consumers be more interested in advocating for people who have a greater need? Would a unified disability community with a larger readership affect public policy?

New problems created by technology

One problem that people with disabilities creating news media have encountered is the same as mainstream media—they lack the information they need to provide accessible content.

Disability News has the highest ranking given by Google when searching for "disability news." The publication appears to be new, with content dating back to May 2012. The website owners don't publish any information about themselves or staff. Cartoons and articles indicate an in-depth understanding of issues relating to disabilities with, for example, a joke about a guide dog's antics angering his blind owner. Side-bar categories such as disability rights, physical fitness with disabilities, Social Security Disability and sign language also demonstrate knowledge that would belong to people who have disabilities.

It is ironic that many people with disabilities—particularly those with low vision—could not read the publication's content. In many places, the font is white on a gray backround. Throughout, the text is small. It's possible the publication presupposes that users with sight difficulty know how to modify the size of what's on their computer screen. However, why should this assumption be made? Perhaps *Disability News* lacks the expertise to provide adjustable font sizes on its website, and possibly didn't consult anyone with vision loss or blindness as a tester.

Deaf News Today is a 10-year-old website created by former CNN anchor and journalism professor Stephen Goforth. The popular publication has almost 8,000 Twitter followers and 1,472 likes on Facebook. Almost all of its video content doesn't have captions or American Sign Language interpretation, though Goforth must be cognizant of the need after having covered deaf issues for a decade and teaching journalism to college students in the digital age. There still isn't an easy or effective way to provide captions for news content, especially for aggregators like Goforth who aren't creating most of their copy and don't have access to the transcripts to provide accurate captions.

Why do journalists who have insight into accessibility needs help perpetuate the problem by including inaccessible media? Is it more important to get the news published than to make sure everyone can interpret it? It takes time to learn about how to make system-wide changes in digital content and all the while, news happens. On the other hand, while news is happening, without providing a variety of formats, publications prevent people who need it as a resource from engaging with it. The heart of the problem is that people who want the content can't have it and since large numbers of people are going without, something's got to give. According to the United States Census Bureau's "Profile America Facts for Features," 1.8 million Americans have difficulty reading print, and 1 million people 15 or older report having difficulty hearing speech. According to the same report, 16.1 million Americans have difficulty with cognitive function, demonstrating a need for readability accommodations as well. How many people with these disabilities are encountering accommodations on news producers' websites?

Accessibility is a major concern for disability news media. According to its website, *i Deaf News* "provides live- and pre-recorded video news via the Internet specifically oriented to the interests and education of deaf and hard of hearing people." Some of the website's content assumes that audiences use American Sign Language and doesn't provide captions for people who are hard of hearing. Many posts are captioned, but the lack of a strict adherence to a captions-or-no-content understanding as strong as the American Sign Language-or-no-content understanding (all content has ASL interpretation) is indicative of the divide between the culturally Deaf and hard of hearing communities. Even within this subgroup of disability—people who have complete or partial hearing loss—there is division within the news media. This is another reason why it is difficult for people with disabilities to unite for a common right to accessibility: they are divided by the digital media they choose to consume.

The National Federation of the Blind also publishes news releases on its website. While content is disability-specific, the importance of the release by Chris Danielsen, "National Federation of the Blind Applauds Landmark Court Ruling," crosses boundaries because what it reveals would shock anyone who didn't know the facts behind its topic: that people who are blind couldn't access library books because copyright laws prevented books from being translated into free-access audio format. In the release, Dr. Marc Mauer, president of the federation, says, "For the first time ever, blind students and scholars will have the opportunity to participate equally in library research. The blind, just like the sighted, will have a world of education and information at their fingertips." If people with different disabilities were to learn this, they would probably express interest because it is a shame that anyone would be denied access to research for their studies when education is heralded as the great equalizer.

People wanting to know this information would have to seek it. The news release is evidence that the federation is aware journalists need information regarding the blind community. Yet, on a Google search, most page one references to the article were by the federation and the largest mainstream online news publisher who referred to it was *Yahoo! News*.

Advocacy and breaking news released via Twitter

The National ADAPT website describes the organization as:

> a national grass-roots community that organizes disability rights activists to engage in nonviolent direct action, including civil disobedience, to assure the civil and human rights of people with disabilities to live in freedom.

According to the website in November 2012, organization activities included a hotel boycott and media campaign to get hotels to provide pool lifts so swimming pools would be accessible to people who use wheelchairs. As part of the My Medicaid Campaign, ADAPT members went to

speak with the governor of Pennsylvania “to urge him to work with advocates and the disability community to implement Real Medicaid reform . . .” In October of 2012, according to the website, ADAPT of Texas had worked hard to get Austin’s Capital Metro to make all bus stops accessible and that it would happen in 2013.

Recently, National ADAPT used Twitter to communicate up-to-date reports of the events regarding their Pennsylvania campaign. On October 16, 2012, the organization posted a barrage of Twitter posts:

“At Gov. Corbett's office, the group is breaking into chants of ‘I'd rather go to jail than die in a nursing home!’ ”

“They finally arrested a blind person after his fifth attempt.”

“About five wheelchair users are apparently under arrest but still in the middle of the road bc the cops can't carry them off #Medicaid.”

“Non-arrestees are chanting: the people, united, will never be defeated! #Medicaid #mymedicaidmatters.”

Brief posts create riveting content, and National ADAPT has created an effective method of rapid-fire news delivery, no doubt popular with its 4,120 Twitter followers. What is interesting about ADAPT is that they commit the action and then write about what they have done to advocate for themselves and others—producing biased content that breaks with the tradition of balanced news. Yet, they are reporting a civil rights movement from within the ranks and providing a historic source of information.

Mainstream digital media and people with disabilities—Content

Mainstream media faces challenges reporting on people with disabilities

Mainstream digital media has helped to get recognition for problems that people with disabilities face. Since the Internet recognizes no international boundaries, foreign-produced publications join alongside U.S. mainstream media, with authoritative sources abroad gaining recognition overseas. The *Guardian U.K.,* which according to its website is the United Kingdom's most popular online news source, has a disability category under Society News. An article by Rebecca Front, "Deficit or no deficit, deafblind children need government help" received 78 comments (and subsequent Facebook shares) and 62 tweets. The content of the replies demonstrated an interest in disability news and associated government policies. Some comments were critical of government, while others requested a place to donate from the editor. Meanwhile, a video posted on the *Guardian* contained no captions or voice description. This is the kind of mixed-up relationship mainstream media has traditionally had with people who have disabilities—pity stories sell. They can raise awareness regarding injustices faced. They can also feed public stereotypes. Besides producing stereotypes, mainstream publications also exclude readers with certain disabilities from accessing articles. The deafblind people covered in the story, who though called deafblind may have some residual hearing or sight, could not have accessed the content easily with available faculties and no accommodations.

In the Society of Professional Journalists' publication *Quill*, journalism professor Rebecca J. Tallent says that reporters should avoid negative connotations when writing about people with disabilities: "Reporters and editors should make sure the person is referred to as

'disabled,' not 'handicapped,' and that the individual—not the disability—is featured. Unless it is relevant to the story, a person's disability shouldn't even be mentioned." In the aforementioned *Guardian UK* article, "deafblind" features prominently in the title and throughout the article and is used to get the reader to pity the subjects. The overuse of the term presents the problem and reveals the less-than-desirable motive of gaining concern for the subject to raise momentary awareness and solicit financial resources to remedy the immediate problem, while at the same time, perpetuating a stereotype that people who are deafblind need public assistance to merely survive.

Cultural misunderstandings

Alternative media, such as blogs, can help balance mainstream reporting with cultural understanding. A case in point is a blogger's response to the *New York Times'* coverage of an American Sign Language interpreter, Lydia Callis, during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Blogger Bakar Ali, a Rochester Institute of Technology student who is deaf, said, "The news media are making fun of how sign language facial expression can be amusing and how it can redirect the attention from the main speaker to the interpreter. Instead of thinking about the importance of this language, *New York Times* writes about the interpreter Lydia…"

According to an article by Jeremy W. Peters of the *Times*, "Ms. Callis has been a fixture at Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's news briefings, gesticulating, bobbing and nodding her way through the words of city officials as she communicates for the hearing-impaired," and, "Ms. Callis's form makes it all but impossible not to notice her. With her smartly coifed short dark hair and sharp suits, she literally throws her whole body into signing, from her head to her hands to her hips."

On the one side, Callis makes an interesting story; on the other, according to Deaf culture as Ali explains, she isn't supposed to be the story. While focusing on the now-famous interpreter can make people interested in Deaf culture, it can also hurt those belonging to that culture because they can understand it as "making fun of" something that is a daily way of living. Australian interpreter Christy Fillipich responded to Ali's post:

> While it's nice to be recognized for providing a service, it always seems to come across by the media as patronizing and condescending. Great article, it expressed how I feel when I see the media reports about our work and about the language and community we're privileged to know.

Fillipich's post describes the negative tone that is created when reporting fails to recognize cultural boundaries. When possible consumers perceive mainstream coverage as "patronizing and condescending," as Fillipich said, how can they trust the publication to adequately or honestly depict them in the news?

In an article at *Poynter.org*, Susan LoTempio described the status quo of disability reporting:

> First, a weekend host on National Public Radio actually used the term "confined to a wheelchair" while introducing his interview with actor Olympia Dukakis. He was referring to a character in her new film, *Away From Her*, but fictional character or real person, that term is demeaning. Why? Because using a wheelchair, no matter what the medical condition, allows the person the independence of movement. The term is also inaccurate because no one stays in a wheelchair 24/7, which is what "confined" implies.

LoTempio continued, bashing another publication for publishing a story with the headline, "Deaf Photog and Blind Editor Overcome the Odds Together." She said "Overcoming the odds" was one of the "troubling" ways that journalists present people with disabilities.

However, LoTempio said the *New York Times* had written a pair of articles that broke away from the status quo. One was a piece about athlete and Paralympian Oscar Pistorius and

whether he was disabled or "too-abled." Another was a piece by Mireya Navarro on how to report on people with disabilities.

According to Navarro's article, "Clearly, Frankly, Unabashedly Disabled," people with disabilities are becoming more visible: "The public image of the disabled is increasingly 'informed by actual experience of disability rather than an imagined understanding of it,' said David T. Mitchell, an associate professor of disability studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago." While the article in the *New York Times* may have offended members of the Deaf community, Navarro's article is evidence that the publication is working to report on abilities and not just disabilities.

Mainstream efforts to report about people with disabilities responsibly

Sometimes, mainstream media informs the general public about disabilities issues to a high degree. In the *CNN Blog*, Madison Park reports that in 2010, Rosa's Law—named after a young woman who has Down's syndrome—passed in Congress and mandated that the terms "retarded" and "retardation" be replaced with "intellectual disability" and "an individual who has an intellectual disability" in health, education and labor laws. The news also provides a forum, and in a *Washington Post* Opinion, Christopher M. Fairman said that even though 48 states had already replaced the offensive word in their legal documentation, it hadn't been necessary:

> If interest groups want to pour resources into cleaning up unintentional insults, more power to them; we surely would benefit from greater kindness to one another. But we must not let "retard" go without a requiem. If the goal is to protect intellectually disabled individuals from put-downs and prejudice, it won't succeed. New words of insult will replace old ones.

What is unique about Fairman's post is his ability to speak with a background in disability culture—his father worked for the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation during Fairman's youth. The article discussed a rich history of the r-word. Two days after the article was published online, Fairman was available for public commentary at a specific time. With a cultural background provided and an opportunity for readers to respond, *The Washington Post* article exhibited an effort to represent the interests of people with intellectual disabilities responsibly.

However, video content available at the *Post's* website in November of 2012 contained no captions or voice description regarding its report on how the world was responding to Barack Obama winning the presidential election, indicating a quasi-awareness of people with disabilities' needs. While the publication did an adequate job of presenting an informed opinion regarding names used regarding cognitive disability, and provided a forum for discussion of the related article, it failed to provide accessibility for other disability groups to participate in regular news content regarding a presidential election.

In an online article from *The Dallas Morning News*, "Dallas-area deaf advocate fights for communication services," by Sarah Mervosh, the journalist appears to comfortably dance around the touchy topic of disability rights. As opposed to the *Times* article's representation of an exciting sign language interpreter, Mervosh demonstrates an understanding of Deaf culture in the way she describes the interpreter: "Her fingers crunch inward and burst outward as she launches into a presentation in sign language." The reporter focuses on the language being conveyed and its intensity, rather than on the interpreter. The article describes the interpreter's interaction with her audience and their responses and explains the problem for their community using a term little known outside the Deaf community—audism. According to the article, when discrimination

doesn't allow people who are deaf access to information, such as what their doctor is saying regarding their health, via interpreter, that is audism. Mervosh supplies statistics, that 840,000 Texans have hearing loss or are deaf, and returns to a discussion of Deaf culture:

> In deaf culture, deafness is seen not as a disability but as a source of pride. Bise, 33, is engaged to a deaf man. She attends a deaf church. She understands the nuances of deaf culture—that widening her eyes and leaning forward shows concern; that deaf people highly value acquiring information from one another because they can't always get it from television, radio or other sources that serve the hearing world.

The article finishes with resources for people who are deaf. As for the website for *The Dallas Morning News*, icons at the top of Mervosh's article allow for users to upsize the font, indicating that the publisher wishes their content to be available to people who have low vision. Unfortunately, the same readers who would be surprised or pleased at the in-depth perspective of Mervosh's article would be deflated to see the video clip on the same website, "Follow the 2012 Dallas Marathon Route." Not only does it not have captions, but it lacks ASL interpretation. As a result, the publication commits an act of the same audism it defined by denying alternate access to auditory communication. Despite the oversight—or lack of technology—*The Dallas Morning News* is making a serious effort to present knowledgeable reporting in accessible formats.

The *Huffington Post* provides The Blog, which, according to the website, "featur[es] fresh takes and real-time analysis from *HuffPost's* signature lineup of contributors." "How I Overcame Disability to Become a National Champion," was posted by the person with a disability, Tamika Catchings. The contributor said that she was different because she had hearing loss in both ears and that she "stood out" as a kid because she wore large hearing aids. Catchings said that later she "ditched" her hearing aids and learned to read lips and laughed when everyone else laughed to compensate, revealing insight into hard of hearing culture. Then she discussed her abilities—that she could play many sports well and settled on basketball—and joined the

U.S. Women's Olympic Basketball Team and won gold medals at three Olympics. Catchings concluded, “I don't think of my hearing loss as a disability anymore. I learned a long time ago to work around it and the fact that other people consider it a disability has really pushed me.”

The *Huffington Post’s* open format allowed a person with a disability to produce her own content, unique in its first-person perspective and perhaps not balanced news, but accurate in its personal, cultural content. The creative, interactive blog feature is a digital innovation that provides an opportunity for people who have disabilities to not only interact, but to contribute to the publication. Readers commented on the post, which heightened the interactivity between people in mainstream and disability communities. The format of the publication was not as considerate. The blog’s font was tiny, with no icons or instructions available for changing the text size. Live video content on the website, such as “Happy (Half) Hour,” didn’t provide captions or described voice options. It’s unclear whether the publication intended to provide accessible options or if it solicits blog posts from people with disabilities. All that is clear is that people who have disabilities passed editorial discretion because their content was posted.

Mainstream created, disability modified

Sometimes, content is created by mainstream media and modified for an audience with disabilities. NFB-Newsline®, which is the National Federation of the Blind’s “free service for people who cannot read regular newsprint,” makes reading material accessible. According to its website, NFB-Newsline® has access to over 300 publications, indicating the desire of people who are blind or have low vision to access mainstream publications. Not only do they wish for access, they are willing to perpetuate it in accessible formats for others who have similar needs.

Since many mainstream news sources have large staffs that can produce daily content, some smaller news groups make up for having small staffs by aggregating mainstream articles with a disability slant. *Decibels dBs* is a new type of news source. According to the About Us section of *Decibels dBs*, the news source is published through a content curation service, Paper.li, a product created through the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology-Innovation Center. According to the website, the service allows people to create daily news because "we believe that people (and not machines) are the ones qualified to curate the content that matters most."

Decibels is delivered via email as a daily newsletter and the accompanying website resembles a digital newspaper. Twitter posts advertise recent articles. Consumers recommend content to add to the publication. The November 2012 article, "Telephone tips for Cochlear Implant Users," links to a hearing implant company, Med-El. Their content provides suggestions for people who have implants when learning to use the telephone with digitalized hearing, which involves practice:

> Ask your buddy to use a telephone "code" to answer simple questions you ask, such as *"Yes-Yes," "No,"* and *"I Don't Know."* Codes are helpful if you are not yet able to use the phone well. The number of syllables provides a clue to the answer of the question.

Though the publication didn't create the content, consumers likely referred the information because they knew cochlear implant users who had difficulty using a phone after having the implant. The information comes from an authoritative source—Med-El creates the implants and their staff has technical and medical expertise.

Another article published the same day was, "The Cochlear Implant and Sign Language– One Mom's Viewpoint," revealing that the publication may have a niche readership of people who have cochlear implants and their family members. Though it's a blog post, it reveals significant information regarding cochlear implants. Guest blogger Christy Garrett says that her

daughter learned sign language at a young age, but when she was ready to receive a cochlear implant, her doctor and therapist warned against using it. However, she discovered they had been in error. “I can count on my hands how many times over the years that her implant was damaged or broken and had to be returned. Sometimes it would take a week or more to get it back, without her cochlear implant she was deaf. Sign language allowed her to continue learning without skipping a beat.” People considering cochlear implants for themselves or family members would benefit from knowing this information beforehand. It would be unexpected for a doctor to tell patients that their implant will break down and they will be completely deaf, since the surgery removed their cochlea and nothing exists anymore to interpret sound when the electronic one fails, making sign language a useful tool.

Other content for *Decibels dBs* included references to medical articles, blogs and social media information. The website has plenty of white space and is well-organized, which may be the result of a template provided by Paper.li. Some video content recommended by consumers on the website has video content, but it uses an automatic format developed by YouTube and doesn’t make sense. For example, the video, “Some Helpful Tips to Survive Christmas Day!” begins by “saying,” “Yesterday, it’s Christmas these you Christmas eve and nobody knew (punctuation is also absent).” The nonsensical vocabulary is consistent with automated captions. The technology is still being developed.

Decibels dBs is an example of a publication for which people with disabilities and their families collect content that relates to their interests and share it as a social activity. Drawbacks are that the publication doesn’t have regular staff, it’s difficult to tell who is controlling content—no real information is given about the publisher, and no writing standards appear to be in place. With many references to articles from the technology industry, it’s possible that

employees of the companies could try to control content by joining the community and recommending their own content. However, readership dictates the content, and the publication provides links to the publisher's Facebook page, which provides an opportunity to speak with her. Because the publisher posts to Twitter, consumers have instant ability to provide feedback regarding content. With the enthusiasm involved in creating *Decibels*, one has to wonder how the publisher and content providers would do if they learned how to report their own content and get paid for it.

Mainstream digital media and people with disabilities—Accessibility

Why make news content accessible?

When making websites universal in design, "accessibility lies not in the document, but in the experience of the user" (Slatin and Rush, 55). When Internet users who were blind found the Internet inaccessible, despite some concern about their situation but no action taking place, they went to court.

Slatin and Rush describe the specifics of the case in *Maximum Accessibility*. In 1999, the National Federation of the Blind sued America Online "asking that the courts declare that the Internet is a public space and therefore subject to the public accommodations rule of the ADA." The case was settled out of court, but after AOL agreed to allow screen readers and other technology to be able to read its interface. Marc Maurer, the president of the NFB, responded to criticisms that the lawsuit might cause backlash: "AOL has in the neighborhood of twenty million subscribers. It has decided to become the company that will create the standard for providing information to the public. That standard excludes the blind." Maurer said that although the Internet provider had been sympathetic, the company hadn't made modifications.

A House Subcommittee Hearing in 2000 agreed with the Department of Justice that "the ADA does apply to the Internet, and . . . [due to] the substantial First Amendment implications of an application of the ADA to the Internet, the development of a legislative record on these issues would now likely prove valuable to all interested parties." By 2001, Maurer admitted that AOL was usable by the blind but that more had to be accomplished (49-51). The message had been sent: people with blindness would not be kept from having the same rights as anyone else, and

the ADA applied to the Internet. Walls that once kept people with disabilities apart from the news were crumbling.

The United States Department of Justice produced a report in 2000, "Information Technology and People with Disabilities: The Current State of Federal Accessibility," that analyzed federal agencies' Web pages. According to the report, "making federal agencies' Web sites accessible to persons with disabilities is extremely easy and cost-effective," yet the report's explanations involving accessibility required expertise with html coding and other knowledge within the realm of the Web developer and not publishers or reporters. For small staffs or beginning news publishers, hiring a Web developer can get expensive. Perhaps it's possible for a federal agency that has many employees and a decent budget. For smaller publications, making their content accessible involves hiring new staff specifically for the purpose, contracting someone to do the work, or getting creative.

For large publications, making websites adaptable to alternative users involves complex maneuvers involving many Web pages, links, archives, and other digital media. While the final product may be "cost effective," that's after significant effort. It might be simpler to start from a certain date with a new, accessible format. One idea worth exploring is the creation of accessible website templates that have built-in accommodations. Most searches for this type of user-friendly website creator yields accessibility template checks, but not website-making templates.

How can news media be made accessible?

Since the Internet is a public space and the ADA requires that public spaces are subject to providing accommodations, then why news publishers should make their content accessible is not as important as how they will do so. Because there are many types of disability, this is

complicated. First, publishers must learn what types of accommodations are necessary for users to access their content.

In a current draft by the Web Accessibility Initiative, "How People with Disabilities Use the Web," produced by the internationally comprised WAI-AGE Task Force and The Education and Outreach Working Group, accessibility standards are broken down into four main categories. Web users should be able to perceive information using easy-to-see content that provides captions for audio elements and audio for visual elements. Interface and navigation should be possible for people using keyboard controls, should not having flashing elements that would cause seizures, and should be easy to navigate. Text should be readable and understandable and mistakes should be simple to correct. Finally, content should be compatible with different browsers and assistive technology.

In some cases, disability groups have unified to produce accessibility guidelines. The National Association of the Deaf and the American Foundation for the Blind worked in conjunction with the Described and Captioned Media Program to create how-to guides for making Web content accessible. According to DCMP's website, Description Key guidelines:

> are a key for vendors performing description for the DCMP, and cover a range of topics from preparing to describe to determining both what information needs to be described and how to describe it. The information is also applicable to vendors and other businesses that provide description for broadcast television, movies, and other media.

The Captioning Key guidelines "were based on decades of experience by DCMP (then called Captioned Films and Videos Program), review of captioning research, and examination of standards developed by various captioning vendors."

Implications for Journalism

In an article in the *American Journalism Review*, Anne Marie Cooke and Neil H. Reisner say, "People with disabilities are the last newsroom minority." According to the article, few news organizations seek to hire people with disabilities. The irony is that technology makes things happen that weren't possible until recently: "'Computers are the great equalizer,' says Cyndi Jones, of *Mainstream* magazine. 'No matter what the disability, if someone is quadriplegic, speech-impaired, or visually impaired, someone with the inherent ability should be able to get the job." Cooke and Reisner's article demonstrates that although people with disabilities have ability, they are for some reason still excluded from the newsroom.

The Society of Professional Journalists was created in 1909 and has around 9,000 members. According to its website, reporting on people with disabilities has been a missed opportunity:

> In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 tragedy, most reporters missed stories about the failure of building evacuation plans to include wheelchair users. In the 1994 California earthquake, journalists didn't report that disaster relief centers used inaccessible shelters and turned away deaf people due to lack of interpreters.

According to the society's website,

> Disability advocates want reporters to consider how society itself creates disability, through architectural, occupational, educational, communicational, and attitudinal barriers to people who are physically different. They say society is what is broken and needs to be fixed, not individuals with disabilities, and asks how reporters can do a better job.

General recommendations on the Society's website include interviewing people with disabilities as sources, not just subjects; checking personal biases and fears of one day being disabled; being careful of language used to refer to people with a disability; and learning the history of the American with Disabilities Act and subsequent legislation. Part of the society's

Disability Toolbox is a side-bar of links to government agencies and other websites beneficial to a legal understanding of disability in America.

The National Center on Disability and Journalism is a digital resource headquartered at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Arizona State University. The website provides a person-first style guide and tips for reporters that include where to get statistics and an overview of laws related to people with disabilities and reporting. Information regarding specific cultures within disabilities isn't given.

Disability groups are beginning to train people with disabilities on how to report. For example, the National Federation of the Blind has a Writers' Division that includes Donna Hill's "A Guide to Writing Press Releases." In the guide, Hill says, "In our efforts to change what it means to be blind, the press is one of the most underused tools at our disposal. If you can write a few paragraphs and send an e-mail, you can help change that." The guide teaches readers what is important to news publications: "For instance, your local paper probably won't want to do a story about the NFB Scholarship program awarding 30 scholarships annually. However, if someone in your area wins one, that local angle might get their attention." Hill explains what journalists think is important and how to develop contact lists. By providing knowledge about how to report, Hill enables her readers to become citizen journalists if they choose, an effort that could "change what it means to be blind." When people with disabilities report on their circumstances and self-define, they are empowered.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, resources are available online for professional and novice reporters so that they can report accurately and with sensitivity to delicate issues that may impact many people. While government agencies provide training and may be an initial resource, digital news publications need to look to training centers with an in-depth understanding of journalistic principles, such as The National Center on Disability and Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism. Each college should have a disability reporting center and related course work that will inform future generations of reporters. Disability groups, such as the National Federation of the Blind, are good resources too.

The best resources are humans and newsrooms should hire people with disabilities to gain a greater perspective of disability issues. Content presented from the *Braille Monitor*, *New Mobility Magazine* and *Decibels dBs* proves that people who are blind, use wheelchairs, or have cochlear implants have unique insights and experiential knowledge that reporters without disabilities would have to spend a great deal of time researching to learn. Hiring people who have disabilities would add to existing news teams. The training they receive would enable some journalists with disabilities to start new publications and teach others with disabilities how to report balanced, ethical content.

Probably the biggest problem that digital publishers of news media face is the need to create universally accessible websites and content. Over time, policy, laws and court cases have determined that the Internet is a public space and because of that, websites must provide accommodations so that they don't exclude people with disabilities. Before legislation makes it mandatory, publishers should research best practices and develop a plan to make sure their

digital content meets universal design specifications. News content should be made accessible so that everyone can use it as a forum for information and exchange. Changes would benefit everyone, since any person at any time can become disabled. Creating accessible digital media also avoids legal battles in the future.

An examination of sources such as *Disability News*, *Disability Scoop* and *Decibels dBs* reveals that while there is a market for news regarding disabilities, few publications are for-profit, money-making ventures with full news staffs. As a result, they have resorted to aggregating news content, which is beneficial in many ways. However, if the staff of these publications were to produce their own daily content, news would be richer with perspectives into the disability experience. With freedom to produce content, publication staff could explore new accommodations and technology that could enhance the lives of their readers and/or listeners. Finally, reporters with disabilities could be role models for young people with disabilities.

As for the initial hypothesis that people with disabilities are not getting adequate coverage, this is a reasonable conclusion, in light of reports and commentary by Stephen King in the *Braille Monitor,* Susan LoTempio at *Poynter*, and Sarah Mervosh in *The Dallas Morning News*. The world still knows little about the lives of people with disabilities—and they are in need of the information that news can help them learn ways to better cope with the challenges they face and learn to self-advocate.

One day, publications created by people with disabilities may become recognized leaders in the news community. We will know this when disability news publications are linked to as often as the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post*.

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